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ABSTRACT

Stress has been defined as a stimulus event, a complex personal response to the interaction of various personal and environmental factors. When a demand, real or imagined, is perceived, a stress response will occur unless appropriate coping responses are present. The terms burnout or excessive distress refer to the experience of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion unique to people who work with other people in emotionally demanding situations. In this study, elementary school principals (N=438) were surveyed using a four-part self-report questionnaire yielding general information, self-concept, job-related, and future issues. Forty-four percent of respondents reported participation in a regular exercise program. Respondents reflected attitudes at least the same or better than usual in terms of variables such as the ability to sleep, managing well, getting along with others, and optimism about the future. Only two events, too many meetings and insufficient time for planning and preparation, were marked as high stress producers. Only three issues rated a considerable concern response. These included the increase of one-parent families, mainstreaming special needs students, and the changing directions generated by the Provincial Ministries of Education. (Four data tables and 10 references are included.) (ABL)

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Self-Report Data on the Interactive Nature of Stress in Canadian Elementary School Principals*

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Herbert Freudenberger, who fathered the concept of "burnout", began his studies from the perspective of the individual but then found one could not separate the individual from the institution in which he worked. Perhaps because Freudenberger is primarily a psychoanalyst, his data have been largely impressionistic and based upon individual cases. The majority of other authors who have dealt with debilitating stress (or what is now referred to as "distress") have until recently provided little empirical support that education (including teaching) is a stressful occupation. Indeed, Hiebert and Farber's (1984) recent survey of 71 articles on teacher stress found that 70% of those examined were expressions of personal opinion only. Although they usually contained claims of a high incidence of stress, only 30% offered any empirical support for their claims.

Stress has been defined as a stimulus event, a complex personal response to the interaction of various personal and environmental factors. When one perceives a demand, real or imagined, a stress response will occur unless appropriate coping responses are present. Whether we adopt the term "burnout" or "excessive distress", we are probably making reference to "the experience of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion unique to people who work with people in situations that are emotionally demanding" (Pines & Aronson, 1980). As we proceed into the 1980's, several points are emerging. These include:

(a) Distress (or burnout or debilitating stress) is a real phenomenon and seems to occur particularly among the "helping professions" (Paine, 1981).

(b) There is a serious lack of data concerning the comparative incidence of "distress" among various occupational groups. Those data that do exist have often been obtained by means of dissimilar measuring instruments and procedures and are from very small samples (Pines & Aronson, 1981).

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(c) Stress is emerging as an interactive, multi-dimensional construct with various classes of stressors which can be task based, role based (physical and social) and intrinsic to the individual (Tung & Koch, 1980).

(d) The use of single-item, self-report questionnaire items can be reliable and valid measures of perceived stress (Frieson & Williams, 1984).

(e) Investigations on stress should be conducted on clearly defined homogeneous populations, i.e. research on people occupying boundary-spanning positions in an organization (e.g., school administrators) is not necessarily generalizable to those whose responsibilities are more confined (e.g., teachers) (Tung & Koch, 1980).

(f) Significant Canadian studies of a general etiological/descriptive nature on specific populations (Saskatchewan) are emerging (Syrotuik & D'Arcy, 1983), as are more specific and theoretical ones dealing with control interventions (Hiebert, 1983).

Recent studies by the author have looked at comparative stress factors in randomly chosen samples of elementary teachers and of secondary principals and teachers in several Canadian provinces (McMurray, 1981, 1982). All have yielded descriptive self-report measures of perceived stress which were intended to help develop some sort of understanding of the sources and comparative frequency of stress perceived present by the respondents. If you like, the purpose has been to develop a "gut-feeling" about stress in Canadian educators and while somewhat subjective, it is believed that whatever the conclusions eventually reached are, they will take into account on the one hand the continually evolving context of regional disparity, e.g., teachers on strike in B.C., but on the other hand, cannot yield laboratory precision, e.g., third-party observation and control!

Whatever term one uses to describe the presence of "excessive stress", few would question that dynamic social/economic forces such as an aging teaching force, declining enrolments in some grade/demographic areas, a depressed economy and changing parental expectations are forcing a variety of professionals to examine critically their preconceptions about stress in the work place. If history includes societies' current shift away from education, mental health, drug abuse, and poverty to energy, balance of payments, and "stagflation" in the economy, then "burnout" may indeed be a product of history.

The Present Study

This study utilized a four-part self-report questionnaire yielding General Information (13 items), Self-Concept (15 items), Job-Related (25 items), and Future Issues (10 items) which was sent to 585 randomly

selected elementary school principals in five Canadian provinces. Randomization was achieved using the OISE-University of Toronto computer bank of Canadian schools and the provinces selected were British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. The response rate was 75%; 438 completed questionnaires were returned.

The following brief, descriptive, and admittedly impressionistic but data-based report is provided. More extensive analyses must be deferred to a later time.

Questionnaire returns roughly reflected the size of school populations in each sample province with 79% of the returns from British Columbia and Ontario. (PART I - TABLE). The majority of principals worked in small towns (2500 or less) or in large cities (100,000+). The school populations served were about equally divided among rural, core-urban and sub-urban youngsters. Almost all principals had more than 11 years experience and 68% had at least an M.Ed. (17% had a doctorate). No teaching was done by 36%. Few schools, only 12%, served more than 500 pupils. Some 12% of respondents were female.

Recently the author was a guest at a large urban board retirement party, where the extremes of fitness and apparent degrees of health were in evidence. The same seems reflected in the present study where 44% of the respondents say they participate in a regular exercise program. Only 13% admit to high blood pressure, a figure about as expected, given the age and sex of the average principal reporting in the study. Perhaps the relative absence of blood pressure problems in some respondents can be attributed to the small number of hours spent in school-related work at home (8 hours per week)! As in the previously reported comparative study of secondary principal and teachers, it is the teachers who report most distress. In the present study, the elementary principals believe that some 27% of the teachers on their staffs show signs of excessive stress. The median percentage of job-centered stress was 55, home-centered 21, and "just-my-nature", 26. Although home-precipitated stress was undoubtedly significant for many, stress was more likely produced in the workplace. Previous studies with teachers, for example, suggest that it is often the petty nuisance events that are significant (McMurray, 1982).

Part II of the study presented 15 questions requiring the respondent to rank him/herself on variables relating to current adjustment, ability to concentrate, depression, physical well-being and the like. Upon inspection, none of the mean item scores reflected excessive concern. In all cases the mean percentage reflected attitudes at least the same or often better than usual in terms of such variables as ability to sleep, managing well, getting along with others, optimism about the future, etc. The same relative freedom of distress also was in evidence in terms of the principals' job-related activities in PART III.

PART III consisted of a 5-point Likert-Scale (ranging from "Virtually no stress" to "Highest degree of stress") for 25 job-related

events which had been identified in previous studies as potential job stressors for teachers and administrators. Upon inspection, it may be noted that only two "events", namely Too many meetings and insufficient time for planning and preparation were marked as high stress producers by the majority. Six other "events", namely paper work, special-needs students, incompetent administrators, lack of administrative support, staff conflicts, and unmotivated students were reported by more than 20% of the principals as areas of highest stress. Although more precise analyses may alter this interpretation of the data, it seems that, on average, elementary principals are not, as a group, an at-risk occupational group.

PART IV provided a paper-and-pencil crystal ball whereby the respondents could reflect upon some possibly stress producing "Future Issues". If one compares the "No Concern" and "Considerable Concern" columns in the table, only three issues produce a "considerable concern" response. These include (a) the increase of one-parent families; (b) mainstreaming special-needs youngsters; and (c) the changing directions generated by the Provincial Ministries of Education. These last three are rather bi-modally distributed in that some find these to be of considerable concern while many others are not concerned at all. At the other extreme (and in terms of fewer than chance numbers of responses), such issues as (a) staff re-education; and (b) reduced local autonomy appear to be of minor concern.

Until a more extensive analysis of these data is done, few generalizations are warranted. It would appear, however, that stress is a complex interactive variable dependent upon both perceived and actual well-being, past experience and present demands. It is a mistake to generalize about either the nature or incidence of "distress" from one occupational group to another, e.g., from flight controllers to teachers. It is also unwarranted to generalize from classroom teachers to school administrators, including principals.

Post-script: The questionnaire provided for informal comments regarding any aspect of the research, including the nature of stressors currently being experienced. Those which appeared most frequently include the following:

(a) insufficient/inappropriate school staffing;
(b) recent illness resulting in lost time from school;
(c) increased parent confrontation and expectations of accountability;
(d) increase of violent/angry/disturbed children;
(e) decreasing faith in Canada's economic future;
(f) The B.C. upheaval: "wild students" and "lack of real leadership" from the Ministry;
(g) Principal stress is not as great as Federations suggest; and
(h) more stress is brought to the job than is there.

Tables

ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
STRESS DATA - 1983

PART I - General Information

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		%
1.	School location	
	British Columbia	20
	Saskatchewan	12
	Manitoba	6
	Nova Scotia	3
	Ontario	59
2.	Size of city/town where school is located	
	2.500 or less	27
	2.500 -- 10.000	13
	10.000 -- 50.000	17
	50.000 -- 100.000	12
	100.000 +	31
3.	School population is made up primarily of students who are	
	rural	36
	core area urban	27
	suburban	38
4.	Years of teaching and administrative experience (include present year as one whole year)	
	1 -- 5 years	02
	6 -- 10 years	06
	11 -- 15 years	14
	16 +	78
5.	Highest degree earned:	
	None	03
	B.A., B.Sc., etc.	22
	B.Ed., B.Paed., etc.	23
	M.Ed., etc.	51
	Doctorate	17
6.	% of time spent teaching	
	Zero %	36
	less than 50%	42
	more than 50%	21
7.	Size of school	
	250 or less	43
	250 -- 500	44
	500 -- 1.000	12
	1.000	.5
8.	Sex	
	male	88
	Female	12
9.	You participate in a regular exercise program	
	yes	44
	No	56
10.	You consider yourself to	
	have high blood pressure	13
	have high cholesterol/ triglycerides	05
	both listed above	04
	neither listed above	78
11.	What % of your stress is job-centered.	55M
	What % of your stress is home-centered.	21M
	What % of your stress if just-your-nature.	26M
12.	What % of the teacher in your school show signs of excessive Stress?	27
13.	How many hours-per-week do you spend doing school-related work at home.	08 H.P.W.

PART II - In recent months as opposed to some time ago, you have

1.	been able to concentrate on your work	
	better than usual	10
	same as usual	57
	less than usual	27
	much less than usual	06
2.	been feeling generally well physically	
	more than usual	08
	same as usual	61
	less than usual	29
	much less than usual	02
3.	had difficulty sleeping	
	not at all	31
	no more than usual	45
	rather more than usual	20
	much more than usual	04
4.	felt overworked	
	more than usual	37
	same as usual	58
	less than usual	04
	much less than usual	01
5.	been managing as well as others in your position	
	better than most	30
	about the same	65
	rather less well	04
	much less well	01
6.	been finding it easy to get along with others	
	better than usual	10
	about same as usual	80
	less well than usual	10
	much less well	00
7.	felt capable of making decisions	
	more so than usual	12
	same as usual	75
	less so than usual	12
	much less capable	01
8.	felt under strain	
	not at all	04
	no more than usual	53
	rather more than usual	36
	much more than usual	07
9.	been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities	
	more so than usual	06
	same as usual	60
	less so than usual	30
	much less than usual	04
10.	been taking things too seriously	
	not at all	05
	no more than usual	62
	rather more than usual	29
	much more than usual	04
11.	been avoiding extra responsibilities	
	not at all	30
	no more than usual	45
	rather more than usual	22
	much more than usual	03
12.	been feeling depressed	
	not at all	29
	no more than usual	43
	rather more than usual	25
	much more than usual	03

Tables

PART II - CONTINUED

13.	BEEN LOSING CONFIDENCE IN YOURSELF	
	NOT AT ALL	41
	NO MORE THAN USUAL	38
	RATHER MORE THAN USUAL	38
	MUCH MORE THAN USUAL	03
14.	FELT THAT EDUCATION IS A HOPELESS PROFESSION	
	NOT AT ALL	56
	NO MORE THAN USUAL	26
	RATHER MORE THAN USUAL	15
	MUCH MORE THAN USUAL	03
15.	BEEN FEELING HOPEFUL ABOUT YOUR OWN FUTURE	
	MORE SO THAN USUAL	17
	ABOUT SAME AS USUAL	65
	LESS SO THAN USUAL	15
	MUCH LESS HOPEFUL	03

PART IV - WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING "FUTURE ISSUES" MAY BE STRESS-PRODUCING TO YOU.

		No Concern	Some Concern	Considerable Concern
1.	STAFF RE-EDUCATION	27	57	16
2.	AGING STAFF	44	39	17
3.	REDUCED LOCAL AUTONOMY	30	50	19
4.	INCREASE OF ONE-PARENT FAMILIES IN NEIGHBOURHOOD	21	45	34
5.	MAINSTREAMING SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILDREN	14	51	35
6.	LOCAL CHANGES IN LEADERSHIP	38	50	13
7.	CHANGING DIRECTIONS FROM PROVINCIAL MINISTRIES	18	39	43
8.	"RETURN-TO-BASICS" MOVEMENT	49	42	10
9.	LOSS OF STUDENTS TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS	75	22	02
10.	DEMANDS FOR "GROUP-SHARED" DECISION MAKING	48	43	09

PART III - JOB RELATED ACTIVITIES

THE FOLLOWING "EVENTS" HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS POTENTIAL JOB STRESSORS. PLEASE INDICATE THE APPROPRIATE DEGREE OF STRESS YOU PERCEIVE FOR EACH EVENT BY CIRCLING THE APPROPRIATE NUMBER:

1. VIRTUALLY NO STRESS
2. SOME DEGREE OF STRESS
3. MODERATE DEGREE OF STRESS
4. HIGH DEGREE OF STRESS
5. HIGHEST DEGREE OF STRESS

	Lowest Stress			Highest Stress	
Scale of	1	2	3	4	5
		(1+2) vs. (4+5)			
1. TOO MANY MEETINGS		34/35			
2. INSUFFICIENT TIME FOR PLANNING AND PREPARATION		31/40			
3. CONSULTATION WITH SUPERVISORS		59/11			
4. UNEXPECTED REORGANIZATIONS OF PROGRAM		42/51			
5. CONSULTATIONS WITH PARENTS		50/19			
6. INADEQUATE PHYSICAL FACILITIES		64/17			
7. POSSIBLE OR ACTUAL SCHOOL CLOSURE		74/17			
8. VERBAL ABUSE FROM STUDENTS		80/19			
9. DEALING WITH DISCIPLINE MATTERS		56/19			
10. NEGATIVE COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SCHOOL		64/12			
11. EVALUATION BY SUPERVISORS		61/16			
12. CHANGES IN DUTIES/WORK RESPONSIBILITIES		58/19			
13. MAINTAINING AND COMPLETING PAPER WORK		40/33			
14. DEALING WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS		41/32			
15. TAKING ADDITIONAL COURSE WORK FOR UPGRADING/PROMOTION		73/13			
16. LACK OF ADVANCEMENT		83/5			
17. INCOMPETENT ADMINISTRATORS		63/20			
18. LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT		58/24			
19. STAFF CONFLICTS		59/24			
20. UNMOTIVATED STUDENTS		47/22			
21. TOO LARGE A RANGE OF ABILITY/ACHIEVEMENT IN MY SCHOOL		63/13			
22. POSSIBILITY OF BEING INVOLUNTARILY TRANSFERRED		71/17			
23. KEEPING YOUR COOL		69/9			
24. THEFT AND DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY		75/10			
25. PROBLEMS OF TRANSFER/GETTING A NEW JOB		73/15			

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